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AUTHOR	Allan, Julie; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a comparative study of mainstream and special school services for pupils with special educational needs in Scotland. The study examined trends in the placement of pupils with Records of Need, considered implications for special schools of serving a changing population, and investigated the capacity of mainstream schools to meet the needs of pupils with significant difficulties. The study involved analysis of integration policy at national and regional levels and case studies of 32 pupils, half of whom were placed in mainstream settings and half in special schools in two regions with contrasting special education policies. Results are reported in terms of service patterns and trends, mainstream services, special school services, teachers and training, and costs. Implications are drawn which suggest that the trend toward increased integration will likely continue, along with: (1) increasing reliance on special units within mainstream schools; (2) continuing support for some special schools; and (3) increasing numbers of children with Records of Needs. Other relevant trends identified include more single tier authorities and devolved school management. (DB)

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THE SCOTTISH OFFICE
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INTERCHANGE

No 38

Provision for Special Educational Needs:

Current trends and future prospects

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Provision for Special Educational Needs: Current trends and future prospects

Julie Allan, Sally Brown and Sheila Riddell

University of Stirling

Over the last ten years, there has been a growth in the population of pupils identified as having special educational needs. Most of this increase has been in relation to mainstream schools, where the numbers of pupils with Records of Needs has risen by over 4,000 since 1983. This seems to have occurred through more intensive recording, rather than through significant movement of pupils from special to mainstream. Both sectors have, however, experienced changes in the nature of their SEN population.

Background

The integration of pupils with special educational needs is now an accepted part of local and national policies, yet it is not clear how far this has affected placement patterns within Scotland. A number of questions arise in relation to both mainstream and special schools. For example, are mainstream schools coping with increasing numbers of recorded pupils? How are special schools adapting to changes in their pupil population? What kinds of social and academic experiences are available to pupils in each setting?

With these questions in mind, The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department commissioned a comparative study of mainstream and special school provision for pupils with special educational needs. The project (conducted between September 1992 and March 1995) aimed to:

1. Examine current and future trends in the placement of pupils with Records of Needs
2. Consider the implications for special schools of catering for a changing population
3. Investigate the capacity of mainstream schools to meet the academic and social needs of pupils with significant difficulties.

Research methods

The research began with an analysis of policy on integration at national and regional level and of other policies likely to have a bearing on SEN provision (eg Devolved School Management and the 5-14 programme). Patterns of placement throughout Scotland were identified from official statistics, policy documents and interviews with key personnel in each of the 12 education authorities. Subsequently, we conducted case studies of thirty two pupils, half of whom were placed in mainstream and half in special schools in two regions with contrasting SEN policies. These individuals had a range of special educational needs and approximately two days were spent with each of them, to try to obtain a picture of their academic and social experiences.

Patterns of provision and trends

The official statistics on placement patterns need to be treated cautiously, since:

- Figures for mainstream placements do not include children in special units, classes or bases or learning centres. For statistical purposes these count as placements in special even though such children may spend a significant amount of time in mainstream.
- The pattern of recording across Scotland is variable. Regions which appear to be placing a greater proportion of recorded pupils in mainstream may simply be opening more Records of Needs for pupils in this setting.

There is considerable variation in recording pupils across Scotland.

How can we ensure more consistent recording of pupils with special educational needs?

Overall, the numbers of pupils with Records of Needs within mainstream schools have increased since 1983, the first year for which figures were available, with the rise in primary schools slightly greater than in secondary. If more children with a given level of difficulty were being placed in mainstream, a corresponding decrease in numbers in special schools might have been expected. There has, however, been relative stability in the special school population over the same period, indicating that for pupils with the greatest level of difficulty, little change in placement has taken place. The most substantial change has been in the numbers of pupils being *recorded*. In 1993, there were 11,465 pupils with Records of Needs in Scotland (in EA, grant aided and independent schools) and the figures have been increasing by around 1,000 annually. Recording levels vary across the regions and in 1993 ranged from 0.7% to 2.2%.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate trends in the mainstream and special school populations.

What has this meant for mainstream and special schools? The statistics show a number of changes between 1985 and 1995:

- mainstream schools have more pupils with Records of Needs
- mainstream schools have experienced a small increase in numbers of pupils with more severe and multiple SEN who might previously have attended special schools
- in special schools, pupils are reported to have more severe or multiple SEN than in the past (this includes pupils who previously might have attended hospital or residential special schools or who might not have survived to school age)
- special schools have pupils with a broader range of special needs (from pupils with severe and multiple SEN to those with only mild/moderate learning difficulties, for whom a special rather than a mainstream school placement has been considered appropriate by parents or the education authority)
- special schools have received more pupils with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties, often combined with cognitive difficulties.

Special schools are receiving more pupils with social, emotional or behavioural problems.

How can we prevent the existence of a special system acting as a disincentive to mainstream schools to finding their own solutions to working with these pupils?

The pattern of placement of pupils with special educational needs is clearly a complex one and has not simply involved a shift of pupils from special into

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mainstream schools. The two sections which follow examine provision in mainstream and special schools, based on perceptions of local authority officers and parents and the experiences of pupils in each setting.

A decision whether to place a pupil in a mainstream or a special school is based on a number of complex factors.

What can be done to ensure that placements are in the best interests of pupils and remain so throughout their school careers?

Figure 1: Number of recorded children in mainstream schools

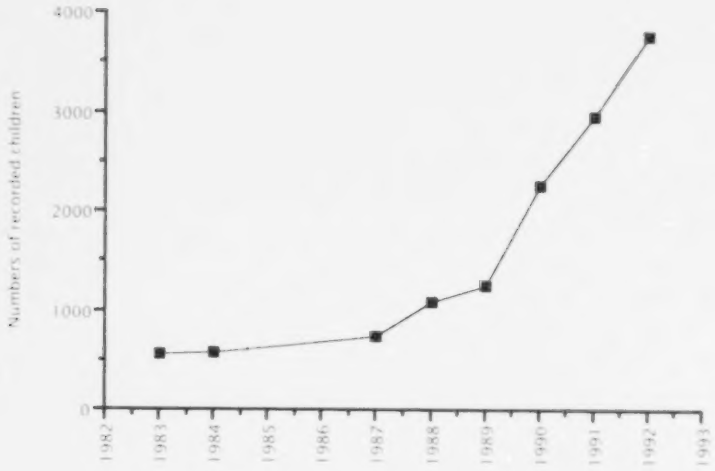
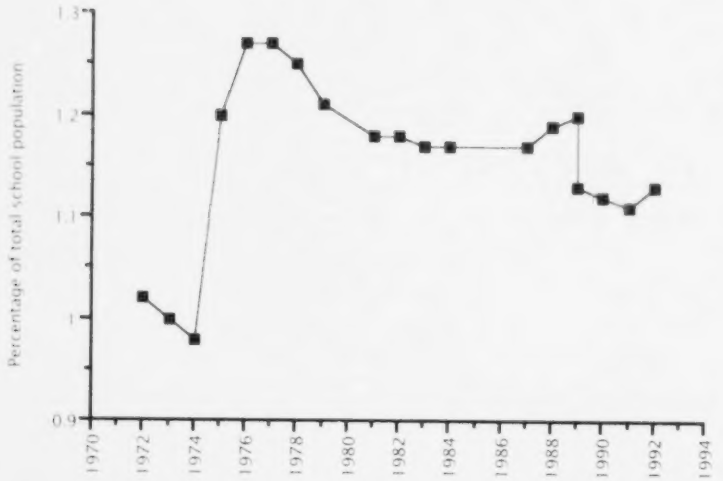


Figure 2: Proportion of total school population placed in EA special schools



Provision in mainstream

Education authority personnel were asked to give their views on how well regional policy and provision was working for children with special needs. They regarded the main strength of mainstream schools as their potential to offer a broad and balanced curriculum to all pupils. They expressed unease, however, on three counts. First, there was concern that teachers were not well prepared to offer curricula which matched pupils' needs, or that they had unrealistic expectations about what pupils could achieve. Secondly, officers perceived a lack of support for mainstream teachers in the schools and thirdly, some pupils were reported to have experienced high levels of isolation (or over-protection) within mainstream classrooms.

Parents of pupils in mainstream were asked to give their views on their child's placement and they identified both positive and negative features. The main strengths related to the opportunity to be in the local school and the child's response to the placement (eg happiness and social benefits). Parents had reservations, however, about the adequacy of mainstream teachers' experience and understanding of integration, of the support available to teachers and of the child's academic progress. According to parents, special units within mainstream schools had the advantages of providing for the child's specialist needs and combining the best features of both settings. They were also commended by parents on the grounds of their child's satisfaction with the placement and more general features of the school.

Case studies of pupils in mainstream drew attention to the enormous barriers to progress faced by pupils who had learning difficulties in conjunction with disruptive behaviour. In a few cases it was clear that pupils were experiencing restricted learning opportunities in mainstream and a lack of a full and appropriate curriculum. For others, however, the advantages in both academic and social terms, arising from their inclusion in mainstream, appeared considerable. Our case studies included a small number of pupils with sensory impairments, who achieved academic success, particularly where specialist tuition within on-site special units was combined with mainstream support.

Provision in special schools

Education authority officers regarded special schools as offering favourable teacher-pupil ratios and expertise in differentiation and assessment. There was some doubt, however, over the capacity of special schools (especially small ones) to provide pupils with a broad and balanced curriculum and a suspicion that teachers might underestimate pupils' potential. The protective climate of special schools was considered important for children who might otherwise find mainstream stressful. However, officers also warned that special schools may be isolating and providing pupils with inadequate preparation for functioning independently as adults in modern society.

Parents of pupils placed in special schools perceived their child's school to have more strengths than weaknesses. In most cases, parents viewed special schools as superior to mainstream schools and offering an environment in which their child was more likely to cope. Only a small number of these parents, however, were drawing on their child's experiences within both settings. The child's positive response to the placement was also important as were the teachers' expertise, the availability of specialist (eg speech and language therapy) provision and the individual attention received. On the negative side, parents were concerned about a lack of academic progress, the absence of role models and larger class sizes than expected.

The pupils in special schools appeared to benefit from the availability of expert tuition and specialised facilities (eg speech and language therapy, medical support, specialist teachers). For a minority of these children, the special school setting also enabled them to take on responsibilities towards others which they would not have contemplated in mainstream settings. For others, however, provision in the special school, especially if it was some distance from home, could impede social integration with the peer group as a whole.

Teachers and training

A major concern of staff in mainstream schools was ensuring that entitlement to the 5-14 programme did not merely reinforce failure for pupils unlikely to progress beyond (or even reach) level A. The increasing range of pupils' abilities within mainstream classrooms, lack of support at the time of the research (especially for pupils at or below level A in the 5-14 programme) in terms of ideas and resources, and shortage of time for planning, all contributed to a sense of failure to attain the goal of effective differentiation. This was especially apparent as teachers tried to meet the needs of pupils with moderate learning difficulties. Most teachers saw their training needs as relating to particular kinds of SEN or individual pupils (implying a more responsive type of support from experienced practitioners). Learning support staff, however, identified their needs in relation to much broader concerns, arising from their wide area of responsibility across the school.

Staff reported difficulty in ensuring progress within the 5-14 programme for pupils with significant learning difficulties.

How might staff ensure meaningful progress and avoid reinforcing failure in the case of those pupils unlikely to reach, or progress beyond, Level A?

The work in special schools drew attention to staff uncertainty about their future role. They reported a sense of being left out of mainstream developments, such as the 5-14 programme, yet were expected to extend this to all pupils. The emphasis tended to be on familiarisation with aspects of the common curriculum entitlements for *all* pupils (5-14, TVEI, SCOTVEC, life skills), but with the addition of a concern for greater understanding of how to meet the needs of those pupils with the most severe difficulties. There was little evidence of effective collaboration between mainstream and special schools, despite the overwhelming support for this from staff in both sectors and from EA personnel.

Links between mainstream and special schools were not always beneficial.

How can mainstream and special schools be encouraged to co-operate more closely and what would the benefits of such co-operation be to pupils and staff in both settings?

Training for staff in mainstream and special schools is clearly a major priority for the future if pupils are to be supported effectively in both settings. The introduction of more modular provision and the shift to a market-oriented approach have changed the provision of SEN training. Modular provision has the advantage of being more accessible, but can make training more fragmented. The new single tier authorities will need to ensure that SEN training opportunities are made available to all staff in mainstream and special schools and that this training is recognised as a fundamental priority for schools.

Costs of provision

Comparisons of the costs of different kinds of provision were difficult to obtain from local authorities. In the past, officials and elected members tended to allocate resources for special educational needs on the basis of perceived needs, rather than on the cost of particular placements. More recently, costs had become increasingly important, a situation likely to continue in the context of devolved school management and local government reform. However, the disaggregation of the costs of educating pupils with SEN from those associated with the rest of the pupil population was highly complex. The extract from a table of costs below illustrates the kind of tentative comparisons made in one education authority. It took account of the costs of staffing, premises, supplies administration and transport and came with a warning of the likelihood that mainstream costs would be *underestimated*.

Education authorities have begun to examine the costs of SEN provision more closely despite the difficulties in making calculations and comparisons of this kind.

What are the benefits of more accurate costings of provision, particularly in the context of DSM and local government reorganisation?

Table 1: estimated average costs per pupil 1992-93 in special schools and units within one local authority

Provision	Net costs
School for hearing impaired pupils	£15,618
Mixed special school	£7,739
Residential school for pupils with EBD	£28,510
Day school for pupils with EBD	£10,007
School for pupils with severe/profound LD	£19,065
SEN base	£4,971
Unit for language impaired pupils	£6,222
Class for pupils with SpLD	£4,717

Note: Average cost per mainstream pupil is £1650 (primary) and £2690 (secondary).

The table shows that residential special schools for children with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (mostly outside the region concerned) were the most costly form of provision, followed by schools for pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties. Special classes and bases look cheaper than special school provision, but because of the difficulty of disaggregation, it has not been possible to provide an accurate picture that includes an appropriate share of the general costs of the mainstream school.

Although hard data on the costs of SEN provision in mainstream and special schools were not available, we were able to ask local authorities how they thought the costs compared. Of the 25 officers (mainly directorate officials and educational psychologists) prepared to make comparisons, 14 judged provision in special school to be more expensive than that in mainstream, while seven perceived mainstream provision as the more costly. Four officers suggested that the costs were roughly similar in both sectors.

One important implication of the findings concerned the training of all staff in mainstream and special schools.

What kinds of training are required to meet the range of pupils' special educational needs in particular settings?

Implications

The research findings suggest that moves towards integration are likely to continue in the years ahead, but in the following circumstances:

- increasing reliance on special units within mainstream schools
- continuing support for some special schools
- increasing numbers of children with Records of Needs.

The move towards single tier authorities, devolved school management and other policy innovation make the picture of future provision uncertain. Over the next few years, unless specific steps are taken, the development of SEN policies and practices may slow down while the new authorities become established. In circumstances of rapid and major change there are always risks that the needs of those who are not in the mainstream of events will be marginalised. The new authorities need to take rapid steps to ensure that the concerns of those with special educational needs are given attention in ways that enable their voices to be heard and developments pursued. The authorities, the schools and the SOEID all have a responsibility to ensure clearly specified policy, guidance and monitoring to support and develop integration. Mainstream and special schools may be forced to look to each other for support. That would be no bad thing.

Full report

Further details of the study are in the full report — *Special Educational Needs Provision in Mainstream and Special Schools in Scotland* — available from the Department of Education, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA. Price £10.00.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department who funded the study.

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